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ABSTRACT

This article describes and analyzes the field of experience-based training and development (EBTD) in an attempt to determine its scope, goals, activities, participants, providers, and philosophical bases. EBTD is a process that uses hands-on challenge or adventure, usually in the outdoors, combined with review and feedback, to improve work place performance. EBTD annually impacts between 100,000 and 200,000 employees from a wide variety of occupations and organizations. As an industry, it generates between $100 and $200 million in annual sales. While portrayed as highly adventurous in the popular media, EBTD, in reality, largely consists of initiative games, ropes courses, and processing. Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland have distinguished between two types of EBTD, the more common "outdoor-centered" training and "wilderness" training in which people sleep and live in remote areas. Team building is the primary purpose for which EBTD is used. Other major uses include leadership development and personal growth. The participants of EBTD are managers, executives, and cross-level, intact work groups. Organizations that use EBTD include corporations, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations. EBTD is offered by over 100 companies, although the majority of these companies do not exclusively do EBTD. Facilitators are seen as the most crucial variable to successful programs. In examining philosophical bases for EBTD, little common ground was found. (KS)

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A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE EXPERIENCED BASED TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FIELD

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Abstract

It is commonly agreed that experience based training and development (EBTD) is in dire need of research regarding its effectiveness. However, before this can occur there must be better understanding and agreement as to what constitutes EBTD. To address this situation this article reviews the general media, the business literature and training and development literature, and several studies which were specifically designed to describe the field. The purpose of the article is to closely describe and analyze the field of EBTD in an attempt to determine its scope, goals, activities, participants, providers, and philosophical bases. In this way it is hoped discussion and research of EBTD effectiveness and theory will be facilitated.

Introduction

Management consultants are largely in agreement that to be successful into the next century, organizations must look to their people as their number one resource (Drucker, 1989; Peters, 1989; Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1990). To do so and to get the most out of their people, organizations are increasingly turning to the relatively new strategy of experience based training and development (EBTD).

EBTD goes by many other names: outdoor based training, outdoor management development, professional development programs, adventure training, outdoor experiential development, etc., but for the purposes of this article the term "EBTD" will be used. EBTD is a process which uses hands-on challenge or adventure, usually in the outdoors, combined with review and feedback, to improve work place performance (Miner, 1991). Advocates assert that EBTD has a positive impact on the development of skills such as communication, conflict resolution, decision making, leadership, problem solving, risk taking strategies, role clarity, self awareness, team building, and trust.

With industry annually spending hundreds of millions of dollars on this kind of training and development (Laabs, 1991), the attention and resources EBTD receives is beginning to be questioned (MacNeil/Lehrer, 1989; Falvey, 1988; Zemke, 1978, Deutsch, 1991). Little data exists to shed light on this controversy. The popular media has extensively written about the field, but because of EBTD's recent origins and largely business orientation, there has been little serious research. The question of effectiveness remains largely speculative.

But what exactly is EBTD? Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland (1990), in the most comprehensive survey done to date, state "Perhaps the most obvious, yet important observation we made was that outdoor based training means very different things to different people" (p. 6). Before the crucial issues of effectiveness can be addressed, a number of descriptive questions must first be asked. These descriptive questions are important for two main reasons: 1) with the increased interest in EBTD it is imperative that all parties should be discussing the same phenomena; and 2) a firm foundation is needed upon which to build further

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research. Until the field of EBTD is adequately described, there will be confusion as to what is being discussed and more advanced research will be ineffective.

To address this situation this article reviews the general media, the business literature and training and development literature, and several studies which were specifically designed to describe the field. The purpose of the article is to closely examine the field of EBTD in an attempt to determine its scope, goals, and programming variables. In this way it is hoped discussion and research of EBTD will be facilitated. The questions to be addressed are:

- How prevalent is EBTD? How many and what kind of people and organizations does it impact?
- How does EBTD function?. What activities does it use? What are the important programming variables? Where settings does it use?
- What are the avowed goals of EBTD? For what purposes is it used? What does it claim to do best?
- What kind of people and organizations participate in EBTD? Is EBTD mainly for executives? managers? all levels of employees?
- Who are the providers of EBTD? What characteristics do they share and how do they differ? From where are their philosophical roots drawn? What do they think about EBTD?

Extent of the Field

The size and scope of EBTD has been largely left to estimates. The extent of the field is an important factor because until it is known, EBTD's impact and importance on industry and on training and development are simply guesses.

The general training and development literature has provided several estimates of EBTD's extent, but it is difficult to determine what, if any data, they were based on. In the late 1970s Zemke (1978) suggested that perhaps 20,000 managers took part in EBTD. Today, with just one company sending 20,000 participants through EBTD (Scovel, 1990), that number is obviously much higher. More recently Laabs (1991) reported that one half of one percent of the $45 billion US firms annually spend on training and development goes to EBTD. Estimates of a more conservative nature put annual sales at about $100 million (Thompson, 1991); no matter which figure is used, the money spent on EBTD is clearly substantial.

Several surveys have specifically examined the question of EBTD extent. Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland (1990) looked at the question of extent from the client companies' point of view. In a random survey of Fortune 500 companies and members of the American Society of Training and Development they found that over 13% of US companies used some form of EBTD. It is unknown how many people or dollars this equates to.

Two surveys examined the same question from the providers' point of view. In one survey approximately forty providers reported serving 40,000 clients annually (Miner, 1990). Extrapolating from this figure it is reasonable to assume that perhaps 100,000 clients annually participate in EBTD. A second survey, with an approximately equal number of respondents, reported over 100,000 clients annually served (Aronson, 1991). Extrapolating from these figures it would be reasonable to assume EBTD annually serves over 200,000 clients. It is difficult to determine from the Aronson survey if all the clients were actually involved in EBTD, as opposed to more general experiential activities.

Laabs (1991) reported that close to a quarter billion dollars is annually spent to do EBTD. A closer examination, using figures for average cost per person from Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland (1990), combined with the estimation of 100,000 participants, results in a figure of almost $100 million in EBTD expenditures. Extrapolating from Aronson's figure (1991), this estimation doubles to $200 million. Thompson (1991) quotes an EBTD provider who estimates that the field has about $100 million in sales.

Activities and Settings

The activities which constitute EBTD are often stereotyped in the popular media to be the "three R's" -- rock climbing, rafting, and ropes courses. In reality, the activities are more varied and less risk oriented. US providers reported that almost half of their programming consists of initiative games (Miner, 1990). Nearly a third of the activities were ropes or challenge courses with the remaining split between rock climbing, rafting, canoeing, sailing, mountain climbing, and others. Programming considered to be

traditional wilderness activities was reported to be used relatively little. This can be compared to Britain where Bank (1985) found rock climbing and canoeing to be the most frequently used activities.

In analyzing their survey of client companies of EBTD, Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland (1991) usefully divided activities into two kinds. The first, wilderness training, consists of activities in which participants sleep outdoors in remote areas, while climbing, rafting, sailing, or doing other high adventure activities The second, outdoor-centered training, is usually held at some kind of facility like a resort or training center. It consists of activities such as ropes/challenge courses or initiative games which can be done in a less wild setting. The authors further divide outdoor-centered training into high ropes and low ropes. In general, top executives and middle to upper management participate in wilderness training while intact work teams are sent to the outdoor-centered training. About three-quarters of training was outdoor training with a little less than a quarter being of the wilderness training type.

Neffinger (1990), in conceptualizing EBTD by activity or format, more finely classified activities, resulting into five categories. His "expedition" category is roughly equivalent to Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland's (1991) "wilderness training" with its higher cost and longer duration. His remaining four categories, "rocks and ropes," "problem solving initiative," "trust initiative," and "orienteering," could be equated to Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland's "outdoor-centered" training. With these categories Neffinger then looks at how duration, cost, physicality, risk, and skill focus (or goals) differ.

Debriefing, considered by Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland (1991) to be the most important aspect of EBTD, made up almost a third of all programming time (Miner, 1990). This is in sharp contrast to the media's portrayal of the EBTD in which programming is shown to be almost entirely action with little or no processing (MacNeil/Lehrer, 1989; Bank, 1985; Prud'homme, 1990). Any description, model, or theory of EBTD must take into account the fundamental role of debriefing.

Miner (1990) asked providers of EBTD what percentage of time they spent in various locations. A third of the programming time was spent at the providers facility. Over 30% was spent at some kind of resort, retreat, or training center. Wilderness and the backcountry accounted for 22% of training, with another 14% being done at the client's place of work. There is good consistency between these figures and those of Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland.

In a survey designed to examine liability for a pending lawsuit, Aronson (1991) asked what kind of locations were being used for EBTD. Three-quarters of the respondents used private facilities. The four kinds of parks he listed, local, regional, state, and national, appeared to be used equally, with each one receiving responses from a third of those participating in the survey. Use of educational facilities was listed by slightly less than half the respondents.

Duration of training is a subject which has remained largely unknown. Aronson (1991) reported that the average program lasted 30 hours while Miner (1990) reported 2.7 days as the average program length. Considering that many EBTD programs are intensive in nature, running from early in the morning to late at night, these figures may be fairly close.

For too long all kinds of EBTD, in fact almost any kind of adventure (see Gahin and Chesteen, 1988), have been haphazardly lumped together (Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland, 1991). This has made useful discussion or research extremely difficult. Both the work of Neffinger and that of Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland is a step in the right direction in that it is the start of distinguishing and describing the various kinds of EBTD. Such work will give researchers a place to begin, a handle, when they start to examine the complicated issue of EBTD effectiveness.

Goals

EBTD is used for a wide variety of goals. The uses most widely cited include team building (including trust and communication), self-esteem, leadership, decision making, problem solving, and risk taking. Other uses include ethics, value clarification, conflict resolution, and diversity. Understanding the goals and objectives of practitioners is crucial to the research of EBTD effectiveness and how and why it does or does not work.

In surveying providers of EBTD it was found that over half of the providers' main goal was to enhance teamwork (Miner, 1990). Another quarter of the primary focus was on leadership, with slightly less than 20% on individual development. In this survey providers were asked what they considered the most important managerial skills which EBTD enhances. They listed communication and trust as their first two

choices, followed by individual skills such as self awareness, problem solving, leadership, and decision making.

It is interesting to contrast these to the goals of EBTD as practiced in Britain. In a survey done there EBTD consumers identified "personal development" as the principal benefit to the companies with team building and leadership ranked high, but below individual impacts (Bank, 1985).

Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland (1991) surveyed the client companies of EBTD, dividing EBTD into two different kinds of programs, wilderness programs and outdoor-centered programs. Part of the difference in these two kinds of programs was the use to which they were put. Objectives of the training were divided as follows:

Wilderness Programs	
leadership	60%
decision making	40%
Outdoor-centered Programs (categories not mutually exclusive)	
team building	90%
self esteem	50%
leadership	40%
problem solving	20%
decision making	2%

From their data it is clear that wilderness programs were principally concerned with individual growth, while the outdoor-centered programs focused on team building.

Participants

As mentioned, Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland (1991) divided EBTD into two types, wilderness and outdoor-centered. They point out that not only are the activities of the two types different, but the clientele are different as well. Their research shows that participants of the shorter outdoor-centered training tend to be from intact work groups representing all levels of the organization. Participants of the more expensive wilderness activities, as might be expected, tend to be executives and middle to upper management. Three-quarters of the training is the outdoor-centered variety, in which a wide variety of individuals from across an organization participate.

In survey sent to providers of EBTD, Miner (1990) found that a quarter of the clients were classified as executives. Over a third were listed as low-to-mid level management. A fifth were mixed levels, from intact work groups. Using the term "management development" for the field, as do the British, is less than accurate for at least the United States.

Who are the client organizations of EBTD? Business, industry, and government were each served by about 60% of EBTD providers according to Aronson's (1991) "Participant Liability Survey." A slightly larger percentage of providers listed serving non-profits and educational institutions. Half served hospitals.

Miner (1990) also asked about the organizations being served. Sixty percent of the client organizations were for-profit companies with 50 or more employees. Just slightly more than 10% of the client organizations were classified as non-profits. There is a large discrepancy between these figures and the results as reported by Aronson. In any event, EBTD appears to be more of an organizational than exclusively corporate strategy.

As previously mentioned, estimates put the number of EBTD participants somewhere between one hundred thousand (Miner, 1990) and two hundred thousand (Aronson,1991).

Providers

EBTD is a young field here in the United States, only being practiced since the early 1970s. It was not until the mid-1980s that the field really began to grow (Thompson, 1991), and it still continues as a very volatile industry. It is somewhat surprising then, to see the results of two surveys which asked how long providers have been doing EBTD. Miner (1990) reported that providers had been in the field for an average of over six years. Aronson (1991) reported an average of over 10 years. It is possible that

respondents may have reported how long they have been doing experiential learning of any kind rather than just EBTD.

There may be as many as 120 providers of EBTD in the US (Scovel, 1990). In the late 1980s Garvey (1989) listed seventy-five providers who belonged to the Association for Experiential Education. A listing in the *Journal of Training and Development* (1991) included over 100 organizations who provide EBTD.

Many provider companies do EBTD as only a small part of their over all training and development or experiential education work. Miner (1990) found that on average less than a third of all work done by provider companies is specifically EBTD. While there are many providers whose sole function is EBTD, for the great majority of providers, EBTD is one kind of program among many that they offer. This "part-time" factor probably adds confusion to survey results: are the collected responses, no matter how carefully the question is worded, in reference to the EBTD portion of an organization's work, or are the responses from the other kind of work the company does?

Miner (1990) delineated three kinds of EBTD providers from his survey data: a) those providers that come from an experiential or adventure background and primarily use experiential methodology for therapy, education, or recreation and only occasionally do EBTD; b) those that come from a training and development or organizational development background and do EBTD as one of their intervention strategies; and c) those providers who do exclusively EBTD. These are obviously generalizations, but the distinctions will be helpful for future examinations of the field. For instance, how do providers who exclusively program EBTD differ from those who do it as one of many parts of their business? What differences in programing are there between those who primarily wear an experiential learning hat versus those with a training and development or organizational development perspective?

To try to determine what backgrounds EBTD professionals have, Miner (1990) asked providers of EBTD what they valued most in their trainers/leaders. The skills listed first were organizational development, followed by outdoor/technical, and then training/personnel experience. Counseling/psychology background was rated last, just before business experience.

The abilities of the EBTD facilitator are important (Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland, 1990). Providers ranked a skillful trainer/leader as the single most crucial variable for successful EBTD (Miner, 1990). If facilitator skills are the most important variable, then training for trainers is obviously vital, yet little mention of this is made in the EBTD literature. Each facilitator worked with an average of over eight participants (Miner, 1990).

Aronson (1991) asked how many hours of annual/seasonal training facilitators received. The average response was forty-six hours. One hundred percent of respondents reported that all facilitators had CPR training. The average provider company had twenty-three employees, counting full and part timers.

In enquiring about philosophies behind providers' debriefing style Miner (1990) found little agreement. Even using broad categories only four responses, from thirty-one practitioners, were recorded more than once:

- experiential learning cycle (5 responses)
- client dependent (5 responses)
- transference based (3 responses)
- team effectiveness based (2 responses)

The responses indicate an absence of a firm philosophical foundation to the field of EBTD. The only focused reply with multiple responses was "experiential learning cycle."

Miner (1990) also asked about the philosophies or theories which contributed to providers' overall conceptual framework for EBTD. Little consistency was found in the responses. Most providers listed a variety of philosophies and/or theories. Even using broad categories, and the fact that most of the twenty-six respondents listed several contributing factors, only seven responses were listed more than once:

- experiential learning cycle (7 responses)
- Outward Bound (5 responses)
- various leadership theories (4 responses)
- Project Adventure (3 responses)
- organizational development theories (3 responses)

- team development theories (3 responses)
- Lewin's work (2 responses)

From these responses it is apparent that practitioners identify no one theoretical or philosophical base to EBTD. Rather the field is built on a multitude of program backgrounds or outgrowths (Outward Bound and Project Adventure) and psychology and organizational development theories. As in the debriefing question, the only focused theory or philosophy that had multiple responses was Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle.

Miner (1990) also asked providers what, if any, inherent problems they saw with EBTD. The question engendered a wide variety of responses. Most of the twenty-seven respondents listed several concerns. Those responses receiving three or more mentions included:

- safety, accidents or risk (8 responses)
- quality and/or standards (6 responses)
- skill, knowledge, and/or professionalism of facilitators (5 responses)
- transfer and relevancy to work place issues (4 responses)
- ethics (3 responses)
- insurance and/or liability (3 responses)
- limited market (3 responses)
- marketing and/or PR (3 responses)

Miner (1990) asked what future trends providers saw for the EBTD field. The trend(s) listed by the providers can be placed into three main categories: 1) changes in the business of EBTD, including a general prediction of growth and shakeout of the field; 2) quality improvement, mainly in the form of content sophistication; and 3) other changes, mainly revolving around a formalization of the field.

Conclusion

EBTD annually impacts between one hundred and two hundred thousand employees from a wide variety of occupations and organizations. As an industry it generates between $100 and $227 million in annual sales.

While portrayed as highly adventurous in the popular media, EBTD in reality largely consists of initiative games, ropes courses, and processing. Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland have usefully distinguished between two types of EBTD, the more common "outdoor-centered" training and "wilderness" training in which people sleep and live in remote areas.

Team building is the primary purpose for which EBTD is used. Other major uses include leadership development and personal growth. Outdoor-centered training generally concentrates on team building while wilderness training focuses on individual growth.

The participants of EBTD are managers, executives, and cross-level, intact work groups. Somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 employees annually participate in EBTD. Organizations which use EBTD include corporations, government agencies, and non-profits.

EBTD is offered by over 100 companies, although the great majority of these companies do not exclusively do EBTD. Facilitators are seen as the most crucial variable to successful programs. In examining philosophical bases for EBTD, little common ground was found. The experiential learning cycle was a theoretical/philosophical basis for approximately a quarter of surveyed providers. Safety, program quality, and facilitator skills were seen to be concerns of providers who were surveyed.

Through an examination of the scope, goals, activities and settings, participants, providers, and philosophical bases of EBTD, this article has provided for a empirical description of the field. It is hoped that this article, and the studies it reviews, can also serve as a springboard for more useful research on the effectiveness of EBTD and especially research into how and why the challenges and real life experiences of EBTD are, or are not, efficient tools for improving organizational performance.

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